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*Published in:*  
Soil Research

*DOI (link to publication from Publisher):*  
[10.1071/SR18210](https://doi.org/10.1071/SR18210)

*Publication date:*  
2018

*Document Version*  
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Müller, K., Dal Ferro, N., Katuwal, S., Tregurtha, C., Zanini, F., Carmignato, S., Wollesen De Jonge, L., Moldrup, P., & Morari, F. (2018). Effect of long-term irrigation and tillage practices on X-ray CT and gas transport derived pore-network characteristics. *Soil Research*, 57(6), 657-669. <https://doi.org/10.1071/SR18210>

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# Effect of long-term irrigation and tillage practices on X-ray CT and gas transport derived pore-network characteristics

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**Abstract.** The gas transport parameters, diffusivity and air-filled porosity are crucial for soil aeration, microbial activity and greenhouse gas emission, and directly depend on soil structure. In this study, we analysed the effect of long-term tillage and irrigation practices on the surface structure of an arable soil in New Zealand. Our hypothesis was that topsoil structure would change under intensification of arable production, affecting gas exchange. Intact soil cores were collected from plots under intensive tillage (IT) and direct drill (DD), irrigated or rainfed. In total, 32 cores were scanned by X-ray computed tomography (CT) to derive the pore network >30 µm. The cores were then used to measure soil-gas diffusivity, air-permeability and air-filled porosity of pores close to the resolution of the X-ray CT scans, namely ≥30 µm. The gas measurements allow the calculation of pore-network connectivity and tortuosity parameters, which were compared with the CT-derived structural characteristics. Long-term irrigation had little effect on any of the parameters analysed. Total porosity tended to be lower under IT than DD, whereas the CT-derived porosity was comparable. Both the CT-derived mean pore diameter (MPD) and other morphological parameters, as well as gas measurement-derived parameters, highlighted a less developed structure under IT. The differences in the functional pore-network structure were attributed to SOC depletion and the mechanical disturbance through IT. Significant correlations between CT-derived parameters and functional gas transport parameters such as tortuosity and MPD were found, which suggest that X-ray CT could be useful in the prediction of gas transport.

**Additional keywords:** carbon depletion, Dexter index, intensive tillage, *P*-parameter, soil organic carbon, soil structure.

Received 22 July 2018, accepted 19 September 2018, published online 16 November 2018

## Introduction

Modern agriculture associated with increased inputs of agrichemicals, irrigation and intensive cultivation has led to soil compaction and erosion, which negatively affect the delivery of soil ecosystem services. Concomitant are environmental problems such as enhanced greenhouse gas emissions, and degradation of soil and water quality. Soil degradation manifests itself in reduced soil organic matter contents and loss of soil structure, and is threatening the resilience and productivity of agricultural soils.

It is commonly accepted that intensive tillage (IT) results in losses of soil organic carbon (SOC), decreased aggregate stability, and leaching of finer particles leading to the degradation of soil structure (Pagliai *et al.* 2004; Puget and

Lal 2005). In line with this, many studies have shown that reduced tillage can change physical and chemical soil properties and can confine the environmental effects of IT (Dick 1983; Tebrügge and Düring 1999; Pagliai *et al.* 2004; D'Haene *et al.* 2008; Vogeler *et al.* 2009; Ludwig *et al.* 2011; González-Sánchez *et al.* 2012).

Irrigation is a key management practice of modern agriculture and is indispensable for today's food security, especially in the face of climate change. In fact, globally at least 33% of today's food is produced under irrigation (Siebert and Döll 2010). Less is known about the long-term influence of irrigation practices on soil properties. Recently, Trost *et al.* (2013) reviewed 14 long-term studies investigating the effect of irrigation on SOC under arable production and concluded

that the direction of change in SOC stocks was mainly dependent on the climate and the initial carbon content of soil. The additional water input increases soil moisture, which enhances plant growth, leading to higher input of organic carbon. However, it also promotes soil microbiological activities, which enhance microbial decomposition of organic matter. It is not trivial to predict how irrigation will affect SOC content, which is intrinsically linked to soil structure. Even less is known about the interactions between long-term irrigation and tillage practices and their combined effect on SOC and architecture. Recent research by Pareja-Sánchez *et al.* (2017) highlighted that irrigation has led to greater susceptibility to topsoil structural degradation, which in turn was mitigated by adopting conservation tillage practices.

Understanding of the gaseous flow through soils and soil-air exchange with the atmosphere is required for understanding many soil functions including carbon sequestration and the related emission of greenhouse gases (Ball 2013). Gas transport in soil is dependent on the pore-network characterised by its pore size distribution, connectivity, tortuosity and water content, and as such, is influenced by soil management including tillage and irrigation. Accurate prediction of air permeability and gas diffusivity requires quantifying parameters describing the pore-network, in particular, tortuosity and connectivity (Ball 1981a). Previous studies have used non-invasive imaging techniques including X-ray computed tomography (CT) to analyse the effect of management practices on soil structure (Papadopoulos *et al.* 2009; Schlüter *et al.* 2011; Garbout *et al.* 2013; Munkholm *et al.* 2013; Dal Ferro *et al.* 2014; Piccoli *et al.* 2017a). Few studies have linked CT-derived morphometrical parameters to functional parameters derived from gas flow measurements (Naveed *et al.* 2013; Katuwal *et al.* 2015). Our hypothesis is that structural characteristics including pore size distribution, connectivity and tortuosity of surface soil will change under long-term intensive arable production and that these changes can compromise some pivotal soil functions, such as soil-air gas flow and exchange.

Our main objective was therefore to assess the potential effect of long-term irrigation and IT practices on soil quality and pore network in a representative arable soil in the South Island of New Zealand. We analysed the pore-network architecture of a topsoil that had been 14 years under different management practices using X-ray CT, air permeability and gas diffusion measurements. Our specific aim was to identify structure-related soil parameters that may be used as proxies to quantify soil physical quality and its functionality.

## Materials and methods

### Site description

The study site (−43.79°N, 171.96°E, altitude 109 m) is located on a research farm of the Foundation for Arable Research (FAR) in Chertsey, Canterbury, New Zealand. The warm, temperate climate is characterised by long-term average annual rainfall of 699 mm and annual temperature of 11.2°C. Rainfall is evenly distributed throughout the year with a difference of ~20 mm between the driest and the wettest month. The shallow silt loam soil is classified as Pallic Soil (Hewitt 2010), which corresponds to a Cambisol (FAO 2006).

The long-term cultivation and irrigation experiment was established in 2003. The crop rotation at the site is typical for the Canterbury region involving wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.), peas (*Pisum sativum* L.), ryegrass (*Lolium perenne* L.) and linseed (*Linum usitatissimum* L.). At the time of the soil sampling for this study, the soil was under the second year of ryegrass grown for seed. The experimental design is a split-plot experiment with irrigation as main plot established in duplicate and cultivation as split plots (25 m × 12 m). The treatments are a combination of two irrigation practices (non-irrigated and irrigated with a lateral travel spray irrigator to a non-stress situation for the respective crop) on the four main plots with six cultivation practices allocated randomly to each of the main plots. We only included the two most extreme cultivation management practices in this study. These were the IT treatment, which includes 20–25 cm depth ploughing, followed by two passes of a Vaderstad Topdown cultivator and John Deere 750A double disc drill, and the direct drill (DD) practice using a cross-slot drill. No organic amendments were applied. The site is under conventional management.

### Soil sampling

Soil samples were collected from four randomly selected locations in each split plot at a depth of 0–5 cm in April 2017. At each location a disturbed bulk sample, an undisturbed soil core (5 cm I.D. × 5 cm length) and another intact core (6 cm I.D. × 3 cm length) were taken. Soil cores were excavated by slowly pushing PVC cylinders into the soil. The soil samples were kept cool until delivery to the laboratory. All soil cores were then immediately placed into a hot water bath (0.5 cm water depth) for three hours to dispel earthworms from the cores. All samples were stored at 4°C until further analysis.

### Chemical analysis

The disturbed samples were sieved to <2 mm. Total SOC content was determined on 0.5–1.0 g sub-samples by an automated dry combustion method (Dumas) using a LECO TruMac CN analyser (Leco Corporation, MI, USA) operating at 1250°C (Blakemore *et al.* 1987). Hot-water extractable carbon (HWC) was determined using the method developed by Ghani *et al.* (2003). Dissolved organic carbon in the HWC extracts was determined by high-temperature catalytic combustion using a Shimadzu TOC-V CSH total organic carbon analyser.

### X-ray computed tomography, image processing and analysis

The intact soil cores (5 cm I.D. × 5 cm length) were air-dried for about a week before trimming their surfaces to exact size. Then, they were saturated from the bottom and equilibrated on pressure plates to a matric potential of −150 cm to ensure uniform conditions before X-ray CT scanning. Each entire soil core was scanned using a metrological X-ray CT system MCT225 (Nikon Metrology, Tring, UK). A metrological X-ray CT system was used to obtain more accurate dimensional measurements (Khademzadeh *et al.* 2016; Zanini and Carmignato 2017). The source was set to 210 kV and 167 µA. A 0.1-mm copper filter was used to minimise beam-

hardening effects. The software Inspect-X Vers. XT 3.1.9 provided by Nikon Metrology was used for the acquisition of bi-dimensional projections. The resulting 1500 2D-projection images (resolution of 33  $\mu\text{m}$ ) at 16-bit depth were filtered with a  $3 \times 3$  median filter to reduce noise and reconstructed using the software CT PRO 3D Vers. XT 3.1.9, provided by Nikon Metrology. The reconstructed volumes were aligned using the analysis and visualisation software VGStudio MAX 3.1 (Volume Graphics GmbH, Heidelberg, Germany) so that the vertical axis coincided with the axis of the external PVC cylinder. Cross-sectional 2D images of the reconstructed volume were segmented into binary images (i.e. soil pores and matrix) using the machine learning-based approach Waikato Environment for Knowledge Analysis (Weka) implemented in ImageJ (Arganda-Carreras *et al.* 2017). This plugin uses a pixel classification system in which each pixel is classified as belonging to a specific class by leveraging the users' identification of object features within a set of images. Finally, the system applies the classification to the image stack, creating a fully segmented dataset. After binarisation, a cylindrical region of interest, representing the largest volume fully occupied by soil, was manually selected for each image stack excluding the PVC cylinder. At least 1400 continuous slices per soil sample were selected. Total porosity detected by CT ( $\text{TP}_{\text{CT}}$ ) was calculated by dividing the number of pore voxels by the total number of voxels per core volume. The pore size distribution was obtained as an average of the local thickness of every voxel representing pores (Ulrich *et al.* 1999). The output of the calculation is a histogram with an interval of two pixels. To facilitate the comparison of the pore size distribution, we grouped pores into the following five arbitrarily chosen classes: 33–300, 300–700, 700–1003, 1003–3000 and  $>3000 \mu\text{m}$ . In addition, a set of X-ray CT-derived structural parameters were quantified: the degree of anisotropy (DA), as an indicator of the 3D pore symmetry-asymmetry (range from 0 to 1; Harrigan and Mann 1984); the 3D fractal dimension (FD), which describes the self-similarity (scale invariance) of an object, as an indicator of surface complexity (Perret *et al.* 2003); the connectivity density (CE), computed by dividing the connectivity calculated with the Euler-Poincaré equation (Vogel 1997) with the volume analysed; the structure model index (SMI; Hildebrand and Rügsegger 1997), that measures the pore geometry from plate-like (values close of 1) to rod-like shapes (values close to 3, cylinders, or 4, spheres); the object surface-to-volume ratio (OSVR), estimated by dividing the total pore surface by its volume, that characterises the pore structure complexity, thickness and roughness; and the tortuosity (T), determined by relating the sum of the distances of the centroids of the pores between adjacent slices to the height of the image stack (Katuwal *et al.* 2015). Finally, a CT-based tortuosity-connectivity parameter ( $X_{\text{CCT}}$ ) was derived following Katuwal *et al.* (2015).

#### Gas parameter measurements

The soil cores were drained to  $-100 \text{ cm}$  matric potential before the gas transport measurements. The air-filled porosity ( $\epsilon_a$ ,  $\text{cm}^3 \text{ cm}^{-3}$ ) was obtained from the total porosity (TP) and the volumetric water content of the soil at  $-100 \text{ cm}$  matric potential.

The air permeability was determined using a laboratory air permeameter, the description and procedure of which are provided in Schjønning and Koppelgaard (2017). Briefly described, the convective air flow rates were measured at four pressure gradients (around 5, 2, 1 and 0.5 hPa). A second-order polynomial equation was fitted between the pressure difference ( $\Delta P$ ) and the air flow velocity ( $v$ ) as:

$$\frac{\Delta P}{L_s} = a \times v + b \times v^2 \quad (1)$$

where  $L_s$  is the sample length (m), and  $a$  and  $b$  are fitting coefficients. The intrinsic air permeability ( $k_a$ ,  $\mu\text{m}^2$ ) was calculated as the ratio of air viscosity ( $\eta$ ) and  $a$  (Schjønning and Koppelgaard 2017):

$$k_a = \frac{\eta}{a} \quad (2)$$

The relative gas diffusivity ( $D_p/D_0$ ) was measured using the one-chamber gas diffusion apparatus and  $\text{O}_2$  as the diffusing gas as described in Schjønning *et al.* (2013). Briefly, the apparatus consists of measuring chambers with  $\text{O}_2$  sensors on the top of each chamber. The soil samples were placed in the airtight chambers with their lower end exposed to the ambient air.  $\text{N}_2$  gas was used for flushing the closed chamber above the soil top to remove all  $\text{O}_2$ . The gradient in  $\text{O}_2$  concentration between the top and the bottom of the soil sample allowed  $\text{O}_2$  gas to diffuse through the sample into the chamber, the concentration of which was recorded every 2 min. The  $\text{O}_2$  diffusion coefficient ( $D_p$ ) was calculated using the non-steady-state method described by Rolston and Moldrup (2002) as:

$$D_p = - \left( V_c \times \frac{L_s}{A_s} \right) \left[ \frac{\ln \left( \frac{\Delta C_t}{\Delta C_0} \right)}{t} \right] \quad (3)$$

where  $\Delta C_t$  and  $\Delta C_0$  are the differences in  $\text{O}_2$  concentration between the two ends of the sample at time  $t=t$  and  $t=0$  respectively,  $V_c$  is volume of the diffusion chamber,  $L_s$  is the sample length (m) and  $A_s$  the cross-sectional area of the soil ( $\text{m}^2$ ). The relative gas diffusivity ( $D_p/D_0$ ) was obtained after scaling  $D_p$  by the diffusion coefficient of  $\text{O}_2$  gas in free air ( $D_0 = 2.05 \times 10^{-5} \text{ m}^2 \text{ s}^{-1}$ ).

Several studies (e.g. Moldrup *et al.* 2001; Kawamoto *et al.* 2006; Chamindu Deepagoda *et al.* 2012) have shown that  $\epsilon_a$ ,  $k_a$  and  $D_p/D_0$  in combination can be used to fingerprint the soil structure using different parameters as described below. The specific permeability was calculated as the ratio of air permeability and air-filled porosity. Specific gas diffusivity refers to the ratio of relative gas diffusivity and air-filled porosity. The gas diffusion-based tortuosity,  $\tau$ , was calculated using  $D_p/D_0$  and the air-filled porosity ( $\epsilon_a$ ) at  $-100 \text{ cm}$  matric potential (Moldrup *et al.* 2001) as:

$$\tau = \sqrt{\frac{\epsilon_a}{D_p/D_0}} \quad (4)$$

The tortuosity-connectivity parameter ( $X$ ) was calculated as (Chamindu Deepagoda *et al.* 2012):



$$X = \frac{\log(D_p/D_0)}{\log(\varepsilon_a)} \quad (5)$$

The functional equivalent pore diameter ( $d$ ,  $\mu\text{m}$ ) (Ball 1981a), was derived as follows:

$$d = 2\sqrt{\frac{8k_a}{D_p/D_0}} \quad (6)$$

where the higher the value, the more continuous and interconnected the pore network (Kawamoto *et al.* 2006; Katuwal *et al.* 2015).

Air permeability was predicted from measurements of  $D_p/D_0$  (e.g. Moldrup *et al.* 1998):

$$k_a = P \times D_p/D_0 \quad (7)$$

where  $P$  ( $\mu\text{m}^2$ ) is a soil structural parameter that is dependent on the equivalent pore diameter (Katuwal *et al.* 2015). It was obtained as the ratio between air permeability and gas diffusivity. High  $P$ -parameter values identify a prevailing pipe-like pore-network with continuous pores enhancing convective gas exchange (Kawamoto *et al.* 2006).

#### Physical analysis

The soil cores were dried in the oven at 105°C for 48 h to determine the volumetric water content and the bulk density (BD) following Blakemore *et al.* (1987). In addition, a sub-sample of the soil cores was sieved to <2 mm and dispersed in a 2% sodium hexametaphosphate solution for soil textural determination by laser diffractometry using a Malver Mastersizer 2000 (Malvern Instruments, Malvern, UK).

#### Statistical analysis

To account for the split-plot design of the experiment, data were analysed with ANOVA taking irrigation and cultivation and their interaction as fixed effects. Data of each plot were included in the analysis as a within-subplot factor. Variability associated with the modelled means was provided by the least significant difference (l.s.d.) at the 5% level of significance. Heterogeneity of variance was assessed and data

were log-transformed if needed. These statistical analyses were carried out using the statistical package GENSTAT (Version 18.2.0.18409, VSN International Ltd). In addition, Pearson's correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis were performed with Statistica (StatSoft Inc., Tulsa, USA) to estimate linear relationships between the analysed variables.

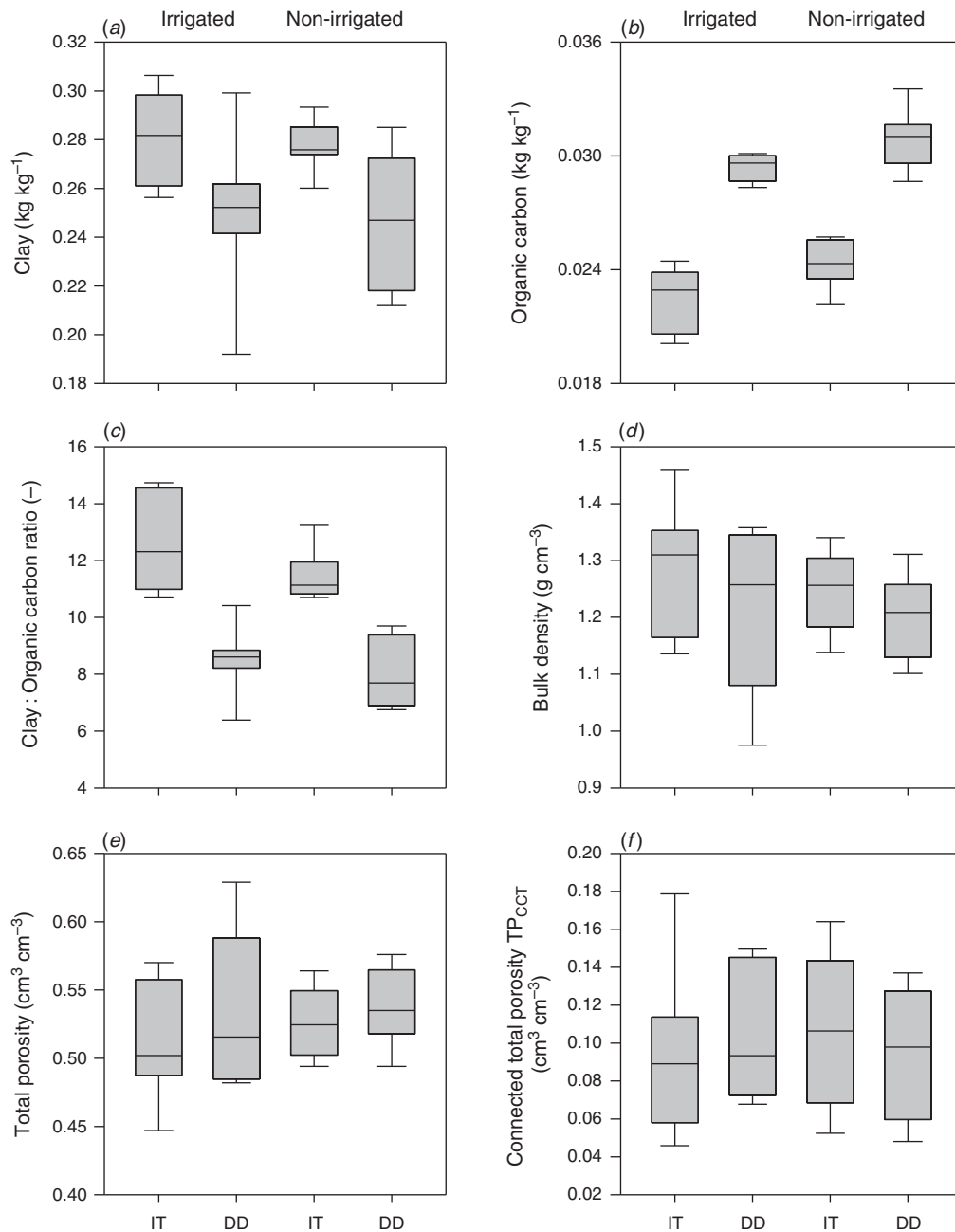
## Results and discussion

### General soil properties

The topsoil is classified as a silt loam soil (Verheye and Ameryckx 1984). We found a significant ( $P < 0.05$ ) difference in textural composition between the DD and IT topsoil (Table 1). The higher clay (Fig. 1a) and silt contents under IT compared with those under DD might be attributed to mixing of soil from deeper depth with higher clay and silt contents into the topsoil through ploughing. Irrigation tended to decrease SOC concentration ( $-6\%$ ;  $P = 0.124$ ; Fig. 1b). Tillage resulted in a significant ( $P = 0.01$ ) reduction of SOC ( $-19\%$ ; Fig. 1b). This led to a clay-to-carbon ratio (Dexter index; Dexter 2004) of <10 in the DD topsoil and >10 in the IT soil (Table 1; Fig. 1c), suggesting the potential for a more developed soil structure in the DD topsoil. Crop residues and yields have been similar for the different tillage treatments at the experimental site since 2003, the start of the experiment. Irrigation has led to significantly higher annual yields throughout the crop rotation (data not shown). Thus we attribute the observed differences in SOC to the result of physical disturbance that likely produced differences in topsoil temperature and water content, and the related effects on soil microbiological activities (Trost *et al.* 2013). Similar positive effects of reduced tillage practices on SOC stocks in the topsoil have been observed in many other studies (Havlin *et al.* 1990; Soane and Ball 1998; Al-Kaisi *et al.* 2005; Puget and Lal 2005). Some studies cautioned that SOC increases in topsoils related to reducing tillage intensity might be the consequence of redistributing carbon with depth (Baker *et al.* 2007; Powlson *et al.* 2014). This suggests that SOC might be stratified differently between DD and IT, with the latter showing SOC content dilution due to the mixing of topsoil and subsoil layers. In accordance with our findings, irrigation had

**Table 1.** Long-term tillage and irrigation effects on soil properties of an arable soil under a crop rotation typical for Canterbury, New Zealand. The results presented are the predicted means followed by the 5% least significant difference (l.s.d.) to compare means with different tillage and same irrigation treatments (l.s.d.<sub>Till</sub>), and means with different irrigation treatments (l.s.d.<sub>Irr</sub>). The textural parameters, total porosity and bulk density were determined at intact soil cores of 5 × 5 cm depth, and the remaining parameters at bulked soil samples collected beside the intact cores  
DD, Direct drill; IT, Intensive tillage

Treatment	Non-irrigated		Irrigated		l.s.d. <sub>0.05</sub>	
	DD	IT	DD	IT	l.s.d. <sub>Till</sub>	l.s.d. <sub>Irr</sub>
Clay (kg kg <sup>-1</sup> )	0.247	0.278	0.251	0.281	0.025	0.058
Silt (kg kg <sup>-1</sup> )	0.522	0.565	0.509	0.565	0.048	0.031
Sand (kg kg <sup>-1</sup> )	0.231	0.158	0.241	0.154	0.053	0.047
Total carbon (kg kg <sup>-1</sup> )	0.031	0.024	0.028	0.022	0.004	0.003
Dexter index (-)	8.02	11.46	8.54	12.65	1.98	3.20
Hot water carbon (10 <sup>-3</sup> kg kg <sup>-1</sup> )	1.098	0.733	1.077	0.634	0.222	0.158
pH (-)	5.74	5.93	5.85	6.19	0.13	0.08
Bulk density (g cm <sup>-3</sup> )	1.202	1.250	1.214	1.286	0.097	0.209
Total porosity (cm <sup>3</sup> cm <sup>-3</sup> )	0.54	0.53	0.54	0.51	0.036	0.077



**Fig. 1.** (a) Clay content ( $\text{kg kg}^{-1}$ ), (b) soil organic carbon content ( $\text{kg kg}^{-1}$ ), (c) clay-to-carbon ratio (Dexter index), (d) bulk density ( $\text{g cm}^{-3}$ ), (e) total porosity ( $\text{cm}^3 \text{cm}^{-3}$ ), and (f) connected total porosity detectable in the X-ray CT scans ( $\text{cm}^3 \text{cm}^{-3}$ ) of the topsoil (0–5 cm) under different management practices, irrigated and non-irrigated, intensive tillage (IT) and direct drill (DD).

no effect on SOC content in other long-term irrigation studies with arable soils under humid climate. This was explained by high mineralisation (Dersch and Bohm 2001; Trost *et al.* 2013) that likely compensated increased biomass production. Mudge *et al.* (2017) found lower SOC contents under irrigated compared with non-irrigated neighbouring sites with 3 to 33 years of the respective irrigation management history. The authors suggested that a combination of seasonal irrigation in temperate climates and relatively high initial SOC contents

were driving factors for decreasing SOC contents. These results support the hypothesis of Trost *et al.* (2013) that the benefits of irrigation to increase SOC contents might be restricted to arid and semiarid ecosystems with low SOC contents. Recently, Chatterjee *et al.* (2018) reported further corroborating findings from a study of the effects of two-year irrigation of maize (*Zea mays* L.) in a semiarid region of India: the initial low SOC content ( $4.2 \text{ g kg}^{-1}$ ) significantly increased with irrigation (+40.5%) accompanied by an increase in microbial biomass.

However, few studies have investigated the combined effects of irrigation management and minimum tillage practices. Indeed, some studies found an increase in SOC content (Entry *et al.* 2004), as also found in our study, whereas others (Scott *et al.* 2012) reported decreased SOC driven by reduced crop root growth, which in turn would lower belowground carbon inputs.

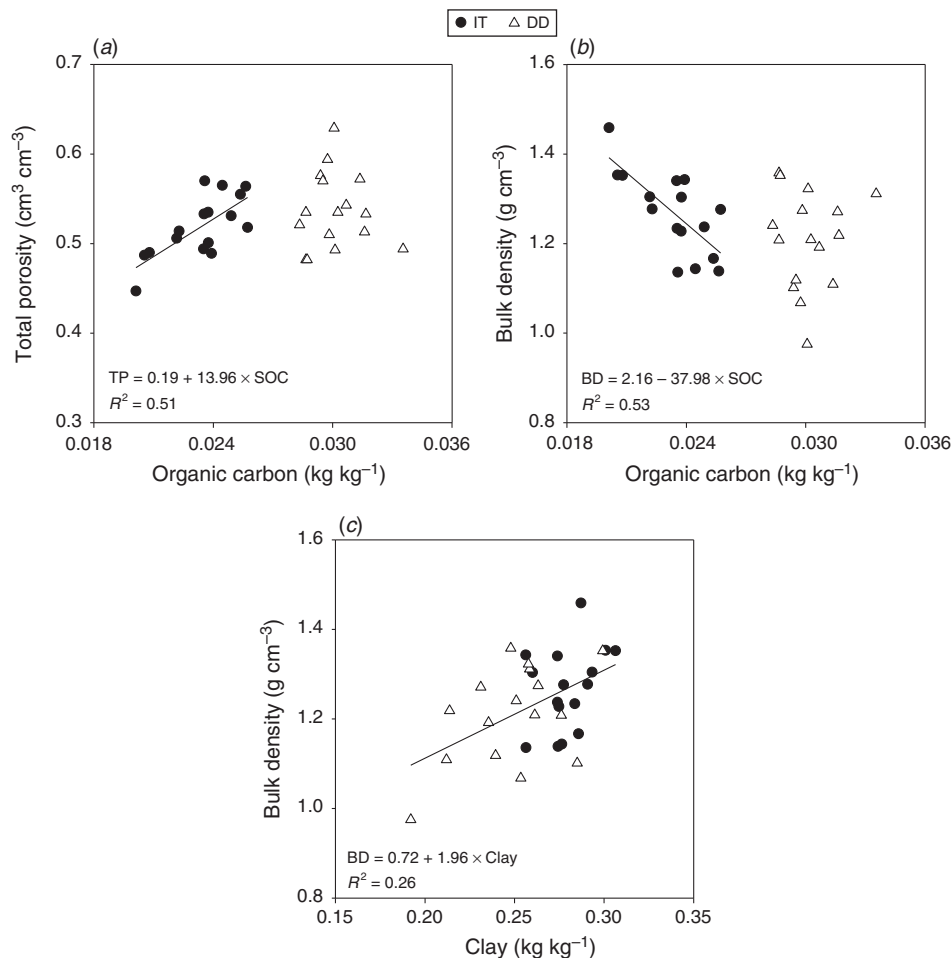
The HWC, which is assumed to be closely related to total microbial biomass (Ghani *et al.* 2003), was significantly higher in the DD topsoil than in the IT topsoil (Table 1). This could have been related to the generally lower SOC content in the IT topsoil or to a change in the bioavailability of SOC.

#### Soil structural parameters

Irrigation had little to no effect on any of the soil physical parameters analysed. Tillage practice led to higher BD ( $P=0.06$ ; Table 1, Fig. 1d) and lower TP ( $P=0.09$ ; Table 1, Fig. 1e) under IT than under DD. SOC was positively correlated with the TP for the IT soil, whereas no such correlation was found for the DD soil (Fig. 2a). The lower SOC content of the

IT soil was an important factor contributing to the higher BD observed under IT compared with DD (Fig. 2b). For the DD soil, BD was more closely related to clay content (Fig. 2c). These findings confirm observations made by Dexter *et al.* (2008) working with French and Polish data consisting of arable soils with low carbon contents and pastoral soils with high carbon contents. In other long-term tillage studies, similarly increased topsoil BD under IT has been observed and attributed to stress of heavy machinery on soil structure, which can be exacerbated by high water contents during tillage (Deen and Kataki 2003; D'Haene *et al.* 2008; Badalikova 2010). However, many studies under temperate climate reported the opposite, increased BD caused by weathering and compaction when leaving soil undisturbed under DD (Yang and Wander 1999; Puget and Lal 2005; Dal Ferro *et al.* 2014; Piccoli *et al.* 2017b). Contrasting findings can also be attributed to different lengths of time under each management practice, different soil texture and SOC content.

The same intact soil cores were scanned by X-ray CT to quantify pore-network parameters. Irrigation had no effect on any of these parameters. Nor was the TP detectable by X-ray CT

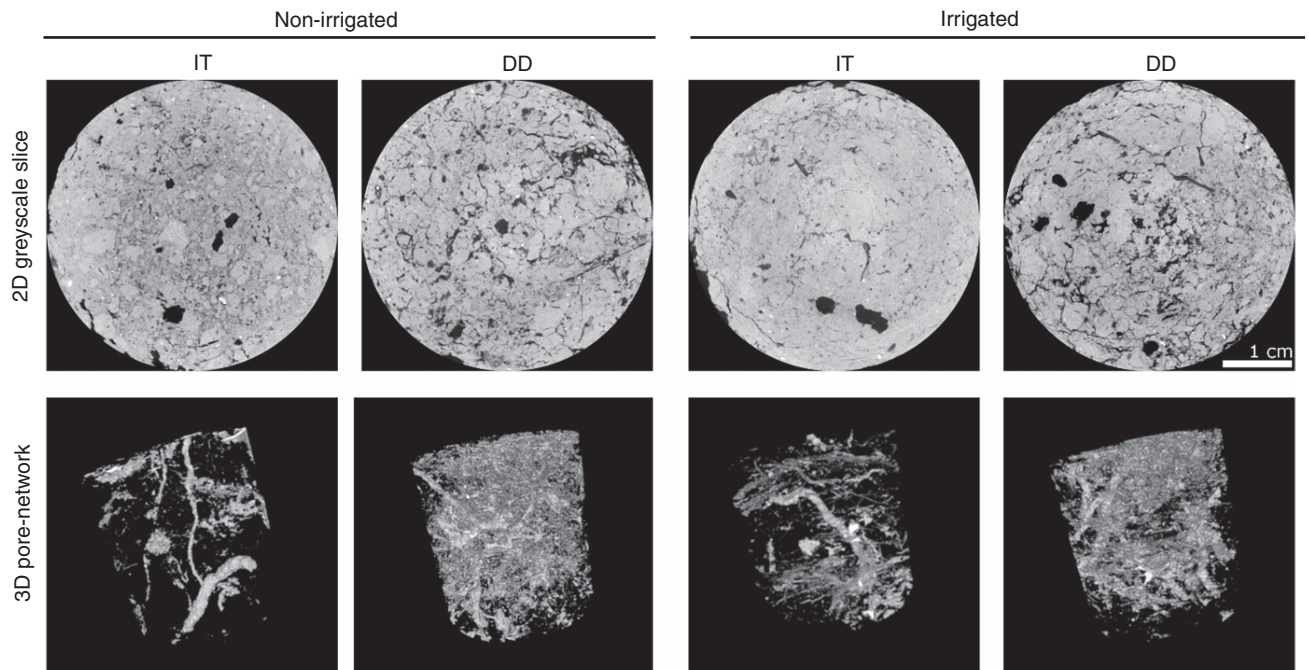


**Fig. 2.** Relationship between (a) total porosity (TP) and total carbon (SOC), (b) bulk density (BD) and total carbon (SOC), and (c) BD and clay content of the topsoil (0–5 cm) under different management practices, intensive tillage (IT) and direct drill (DD).

( $TP_{CT}$ ; pores  $>33\ \mu\text{m}$ ) affected by tillage (Fig. 3). The average  $TP_{CT}$  was  $0.113\ \text{cm}^3\ \text{cm}^{-3}$  and ranged between 12 and 35% of the TP. Limiting the pore volume to the interconnected pore network from the top of a soil core to its bottom ( $TP_{CCT}$ ; Fig. 1f) did not change the results with respect to significance but revealed that a single pore cluster accounted for between 83 and 92% of the  $TP_{CT}$  (Table 2). In the following, we only consider this connected porosity  $TP_{CCT}$  and its related parameters.

The structural parameters  $DA_{CCT}$ ,  $FD_{CCT}$ ,  $CE_{CCT}$  and  $T_{CCT}$  equally showed a random pattern regardless of management (Table 2). The average degree of anisotropy  $DA_{CCT}$  was 0.21,

indicating an almost symmetrical structure of the soils. The fractal dimension  $FD_{CCT}$  averaged 2.33, the average pore connectivity  $CE_{CCT}$ , quantified by the Euler number, was  $-4.5 \times 10^{-10}\ \mu\text{m}^{-3}$ , and tortuosity  $T_{CCT}$  was on average 3.2. Although in our study these parameters did not differentiate management practices (Table 2), others reported structural differences due to tillage, for instance, Pagliai *et al.* (2004) found a higher percentage of connected pores under minimum tillage with a disk harrow compared with conventional tillage with mouldboard plough to a depth of 40 cm. In contrast, Pires *et al.* (2017) reported lower connectivity under DD compared with IT.



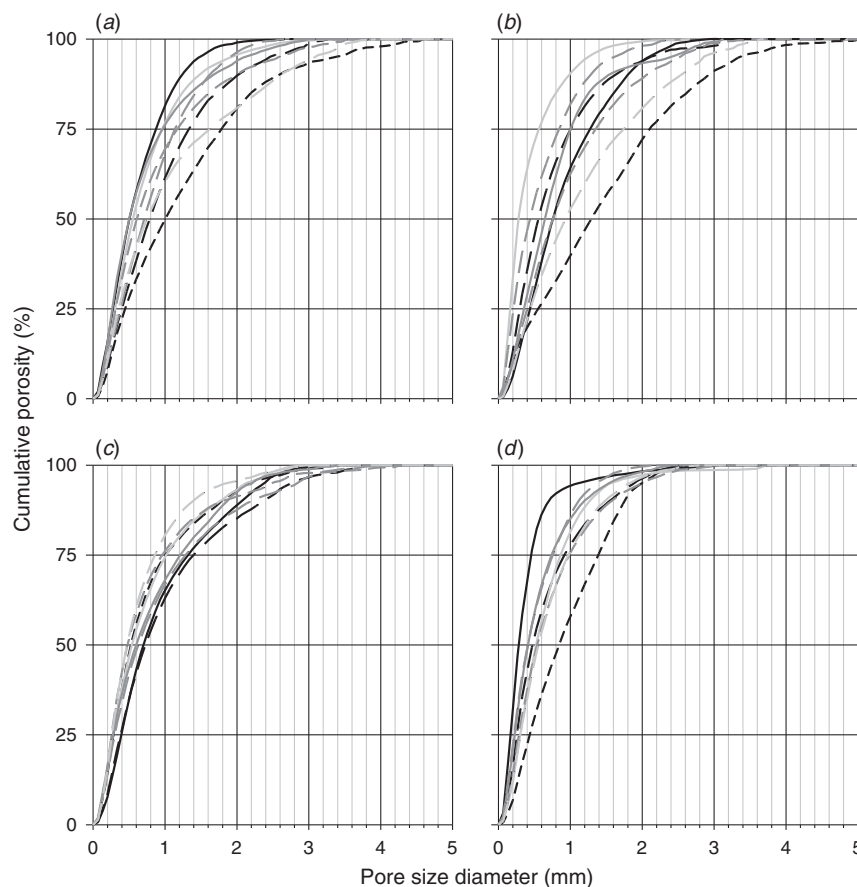
**Fig. 3.** 2D sections and 3D porosity of selected topsoil cores under long-term tillage (IT, intensive tillage; DD, direct drill) and irrigation practices analysed in this study.

**Table 2.** Long-term tillage and irrigation effects on soil structural properties of the topsoil (0–5 cm) of an arable soil under a crop rotation typical for Canterbury, New Zealand. All properties were calculated for the CT-visible pores connected from the top to the bottom of a core. The results presented are the predicted means followed by the 5% least significant difference (l.s.d.) to compare means with different tillage and same irrigation treatments (l.s.d.<sub>Till</sub>), and means with different irrigation treatments (l.s.d.<sub>Irr</sub>)

DD, Direct drill; IT, Intensive tillage;  $TP_{CCT}$ , connected total porosity measured with X-ray CT;  $DA_{CCT}$ , degree of anisotropy;  $CE_{CCT}$ , connectivity;  $FD_{CCT}$ , fractal dimension;  $OSVR_{CCT}$ , object surface-to-volume-ratio;  $MPD_{CCT}$ , mean pore diameter;  $SMI_{CCT}$ , structure model index;  $T_{CCT}$ , tortuosity

Treatment	Non-irrigated		Irrigated		l.s.d. <sub>0.05</sub>	
	DD	IT	DD	IT	l.s.d. <sub>Till</sub>	l.s.d. <sub>Irr</sub>
$TP_{CCT}\ (\text{cm}^3\ \text{cm}^{-3})$	0.094	0.106	0.105	0.094	0.044	0.029
$DA_{CCT}$	0.21	0.20	0.25	0.17	0.28	0.19
$CE_{CCT} \times 10^{-10}\ (\mu\text{m}^{-3})$	-5.62	-3.50	-4.44	-4.48	7.950	5.130
$FD_{CCT}$	2.36	2.33	2.35	2.30	0.20	0.12
$OSVR_{CCT}\ (\mu\text{m}^{-1})$	0.008	0.007	0.007	0.007	0.003	0.002
$MPD_{CCT}\ (\mu\text{m})$	681.46	910.43	858.17	913.18	105.99	83.10
$SMI_{CCT}$	1.63	2.43	1.68	2.18	2.17	1.40
$T_{CCT}$	3.33	3.21	3.16	3.19	2.40	1.63





**Fig. 4.** Pore size distribution of the connected pore volume ( $TP_{CCT}$ ) for the topsoil (0–5 cm) under (a) non-irrigated intensive tillage, (b) irrigated intensive tillage, (c) irrigated direct drill and (d) non-irrigated direct drill determined by X-ray CT. For each treatment eight intact cores were scanned.

Nevertheless, interesting correlations between the CT-derived parameters were found in our study. As suggested by Perret *et al.* (2003), higher values for fractal dimension can describe augmented pore tortuosity or pore complexity. The significant and negative correlation observed between  $FD_{CCT}$  and  $T_{CCT}$  ( $r = -0.6$ ) highlights that more tortuous pore networks were also dominated by less irregular pore volumes, which did not occupy the entire soil space. Similarly, the correlations between  $CE_{CCT}$  and  $FD_{CCT}$  ( $r = -0.76$ ) and between  $CE_{CCT}$  and  $T_{CCT}$  ( $r = 0.39$ ) show that well-connected pore networks were more tortuous, and in turn less scattered throughout the soil matrix. Similar relationships have also been reported in the past for different types of soils, from sandy loam to clay (Chamindu Deepagoda *et al.* 2012; Katuwal *et al.* 2015; Piccoli *et al.* 2017a).

Fractal dimension was also correlated strongly and negatively with BD ( $r = -0.78$ ) and positively with sand contents ( $r = 0.47$ ). Usually, FD is found to increase in soils with increasing clay and fine contents (Deng *et al.* 2017). The mechanical effect of regular ploughing overrode this relationship.

In contrast to the above-mentioned structural parameters, IT significantly ( $P = 0.005$ ) increased the mean pore diameter (912  $\mu\text{m}$ ) compared with DD (770  $\mu\text{m}$ ) ( $MPD_{CCT}$ , Table 2).

**Table 3.** Pore size distribution of the connected pores for the topsoil under long-term irrigation and tillage treatment analysed by X-ray CT. Presented are the predicted mean percentages followed by the 5% least significant difference (l.s.d.) to compare means with different tillage and same irrigation treatments (l.s.d.<sub>Till</sub>), and means with different irrigation treatments (l.s.d.<sub>Irr</sub>)

Treatment	Non-irrigated		Irrigated		l.s.d.	
	DD	IT	DD	IT	l.s.d. <sub>Till</sub>	l.s.d. <sub>Irr</sub>
30–300 $\mu\text{m}$	26.63	18.83	21.73	21.62	15.441	10.224
300–700 $\mu\text{m}$	37.28	32.09	33.98	29.43	3.566	2.075
700–1003 $\mu\text{m}$	15.29	17.00	15.39	16.52	8.480	5.247
1003–3000 $\mu\text{m}$	20.59	30.08	27.48	30.56	6.966	4.840
>3000 $\mu\text{m}$	0.21	2.00	1.43	2.60	4.437	2.585

Object surface-to-volume ratio ( $OSVR_{CCT}$ ) slightly decreased under IT, suggesting that IT augmented both soil disaggregation (Kay and Vanden Bygaart 2002) and pore structure simplification. These results are in agreement with those of soil pore size distribution: indeed, IT showed generally less steep and more variable cumulative porosity curves (Fig. 4a and 4b) than those of DD (Fig. 4c and 4d), which were

**Table 4.** Long-term tillage and irrigation effects on gas parameters of the topsoil (0–5 cm) of an arable soil under a crop rotation typical for Canterbury, New Zealand. Presented are the predicted mean percentages followed by the 5% least significant difference (l.s.d.) to compare means with different tillage and same irrigation treatments (l.s.d.<sub>Till</sub>), and means with different irrigation treatments (l.s.d.<sub>Irr</sub>)

Treatment	Non-irrigated		Irrigated		l.s.d.	
	DD	IT	DD	IT	l.s.d. <sub>Till</sub>	l.s.d. <sub>Irr</sub>
Air-filled porosity ( $\text{cm}^3 \text{cm}^{-3}$ )	0.153	0.161	0.140	0.147	0.080	0.068
Air permeability <sup>A</sup> ( $\mu\text{m}^2$ )	114	225	115	222	4.80 <sup>B</sup>	5.35 <sup>B</sup>
Gas diffusivity	0.033	0.042	0.031	0.042	0.035	0.021
Equiv. pore diameter ( $\mu\text{m}$ )	357	482	368	495	401	366
<i>P</i> -parameter	3513	5666	3887	6011	3.69 <sup>B</sup>	4.70 <sup>B</sup>
$\tau$	2.16	1.99	2.12	1.97	0.46	0.42
<i>X</i>	1.82	1.75	1.76	1.69	0.26	0.41

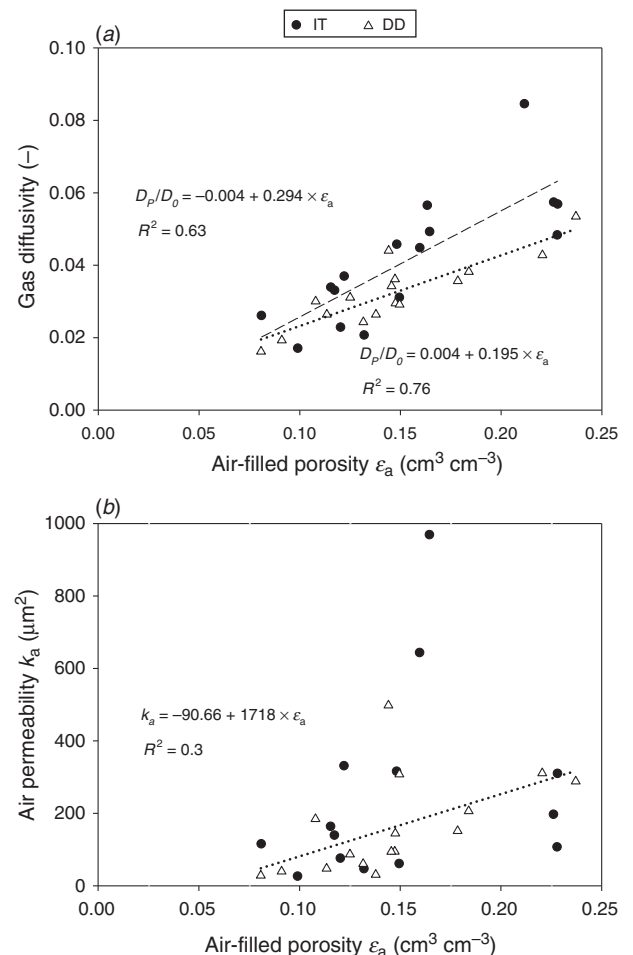
<sup>A</sup>Removed 2 outliers with large  $k_a$ -values due to gap between soil and sleeve during measurements; <sup>B</sup>least-square ratio: smallest ratio for which the ratio between back-transformed means was significant.

also characterised by a larger proportion of smaller pores considering only those detected by X-ray CT (Fig. 3). For all treatments the majority of pores (~70% of TP<sub>CCT</sub>) was smaller than 1003  $\mu\text{m}$  (Table 3). In particular, the absolute volumes of the pore size class 300–700  $\mu\text{m}$  were significantly higher ( $P=0.014$ ) under DD than under IT. Lower absolute volumes were observed for pores in the size class 1003–3000  $\mu\text{m}$  ( $P=0.032$ ) for DD compared with IT, leading to larger variability in the pore size distributions and reflecting more disturbed soil conditions with tillage. In contrast, larger pores were often found under DD than under IT due to earthworm activities and root growth (Wahl *et al.* 2004), but results depend on depth, pore size class considered, and soil type. The irrigated topsoil under IT (Fig. 4b) had the highest percentage of large pores (>3 mm) as well as the largest pores, albeit these did not contribute more than max 9% to the TP<sub>CCT</sub>, the average contribution was 2.6% (Table 3).

Finally, the structure model index, SMI a measure for the plate- or rod-like geometry of pores (Hildebrand and Rügsegger 1997), likewise was increased ( $P=0.1$ ), indicating that in the IT soil pores tended to have a cylindrical (SMI=2.3) rather than plate-like (SMI=1.65) shape. It must be noted that the X-ray CT analysis was conducted only on pores >33  $\mu\text{m}$ , which contributed ~19% to the TP in our soils, thus limiting the understanding of soil microstructural changes.

#### Functional structural parameters for gas exchange processes: gas diffusivity and air permeability

The  $k_a$  of the topsoil, determined at the same soil cores used for X-ray CT scanning at a matric potential of  $-100 \text{ cm}$ , was classified as ‘fast’ (101–200  $\mu\text{m}^2$ ) to ‘very fast’ (>201  $\mu\text{m}^2$ ) according to Fish and Koppi’s (1994) scoring classes. These results suggest that the topsoil had a good structure with many interaggregate pores. Air permeability is the dominant control for air exchange processes in the topsoil. Irrigation treatment had little influence on  $k_a$ , whereas tillage increased  $k_a$  ( $P=0.15$ ; Table 4). In a five-year experiment, Piccoli *et al.* (2017b) found little to no difference in  $k_a$  between tilled and non-tilled silty loam soils, although characterised by lower SOC content (~10 g  $\text{kg}^{-1}$ ) and higher BD (>1.45 g  $\text{cm}^{-3}$ ) compared with the soils used in our study. In contrast, Vogeler *et al.* (2009) found



**Fig. 5.** Relationship between (a) gas diffusivity and air-filled porosity, and (b) air permeability and air-filled porosity under intensive tillage (IT) and direct drill (DD).

higher air permeability in conservation tillage than in IT. The parameters  $D_p/D_0$  and  $d$  were not affected by any of the long-term treatments (Table 4).  $D_p/D_0$  was linearly related to  $\epsilon_a$  (Fig. 5a). The regression coefficients were 0.63 and 0.76 for the

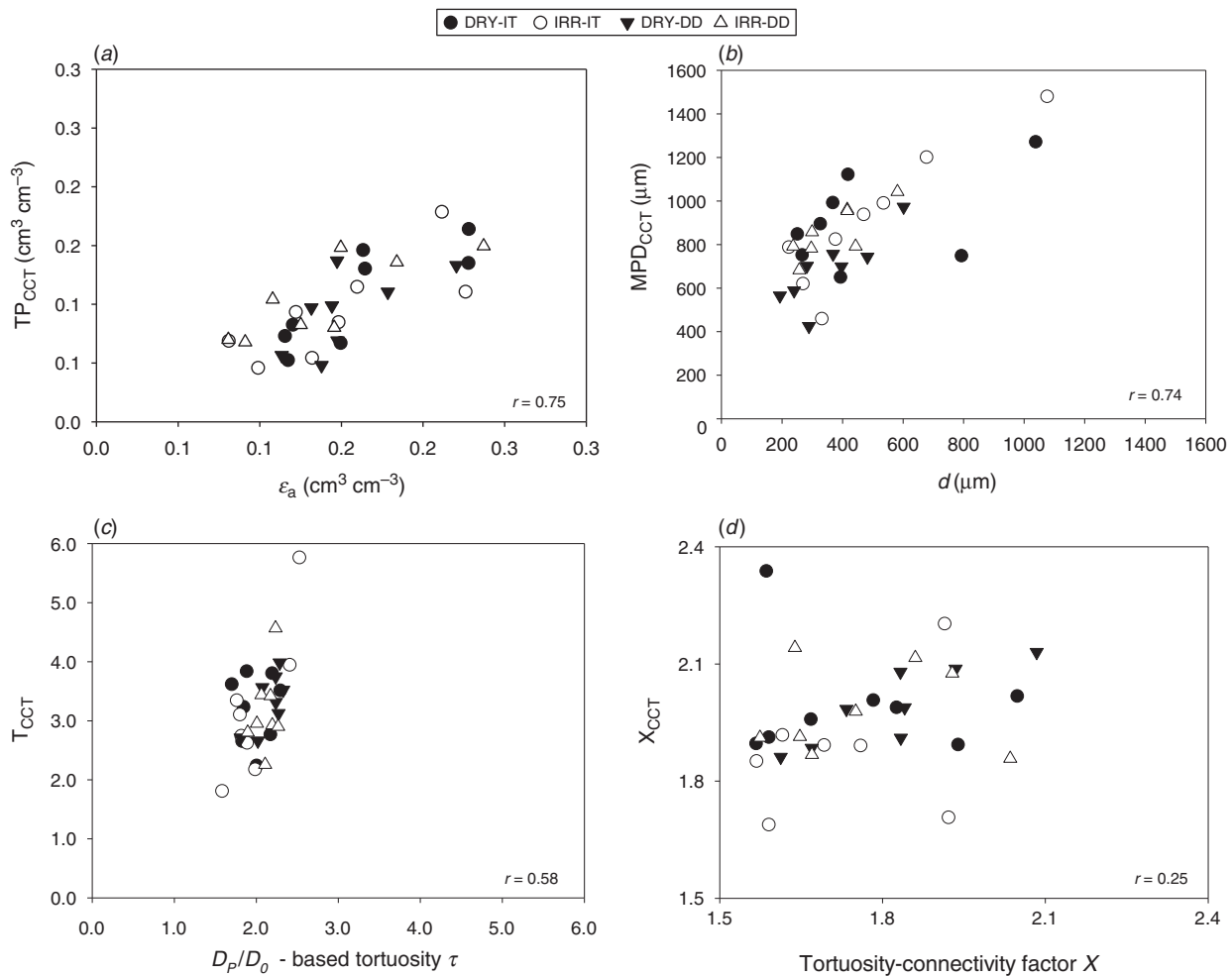
IT and DD topsoils respectively. Regressing  $k_a$  with  $\varepsilon_a$  revealed a larger scatter of  $k_a$  compared with  $D_p/D_0$  (Fig. 5b). This was particularly the case for the IT topsoils, which exhibited a non-linear relationship. The comparison of these two relationships reflects the dependence of  $\varepsilon_a$  on pore size and continuity (Ball 1981b).

The average  $P$ -parameter values for the IT and DD topsoils were 9177 and 4666 respectively. Both these values are high compared with loamy Danish soils with average  $P$ -parameter values of 700 (Kawamoto *et al.* 2006). The extremely high  $P$ -parameter values for the IT soil reflect that the IT soil was SOC-depleted as already seen in its high clay-to-SOC ratio (Fig. 1c). It seems that crossing the previously suggested Dexter index threshold value of 10 (Dexter *et al.* 2008) resulted in a shift to a more pipe-like soil structure with an overall more poorly connected pore network, as revealed by the visual inspection of the CT-derived images (Fig. 3), and also quantified in terms of  $MPD_{CCT}$ ,  $CE_{CCT}$  and  $SMI_{CCT}$  (Table 2). In addition, in a multiple regression analysis 66% of the total variability of the  $P$ -parameter was explained

by  $MPD_{CCT}$  ( $\beta_1 = 0.8$ ), HWC ( $\beta_2 = -1.9$ ) and SOC ( $\beta_3 = 1.8$ ;  $P < 0.0001$ ). Although the soils had similar  $TP_{CCT}$ , the functional pore-network structure was quite different between the DD and IT soil, supported by both gas transport measurements and derived structural parameters and the CT-derived parameters.

#### Relationships between soil quality and X-ray CT-derived structural parameters and functional structural parameters for soil gas exchange

The laboratory measurements of the structural parameters  $D_p/D_0$  and  $k_a$ , necessary for characterising gas transport processes, were conducted at a matric potential of  $-100$  cm. According to the capillary rise equation pores with a diameter larger than  $30 \mu\text{m}$  were drained at this tension. The X-ray CT scans of the intact soil cores were acquired at a matric potential of  $-150$  cm. The final CT image resolution was  $33 \mu\text{m}$  meaning that only pores with a diameter larger than  $33 \mu\text{m}$  were visible. The closeness of these two pore diameters associated with the



**Fig. 6.** Relationships between (a) total pore volume visible by CT and the air-filled porosity determined at  $-100$  cm matric potential, (b) X-ray CT-derived mean pore diameter  $MPD_{CCT}$  and the equivalent pore diameter,  $d$ , (c) tortuosity determined from X-ray CT images and a tortuosity parameter ( $\tau$ ) calculated based on measurements of  $D_p/D_0$ , and (d) the tortuosity-connectivity factor  $X$  derived by X-ray CT and based on gas measurements for topsoils under different management practices (IRR, irrigated; DRY, non-irrigated; IT, intensive tillage; DD, direct drill).

**Table 5. Pearson correlation coefficients ( $r$ ) between the structural parameters derived with X-ray CT and the functional structural parameters for gas exchange processes based on gas measurements. Boldfaced figures indicate significant parameters at the 0.05 significance level**

TP, total porosity; TP<sub>CCT</sub>, connected total porosity measured with X-ray CT; DA<sub>CCT</sub>, degree of anisotropy; CE<sub>CCT</sub>, connectivity; FD<sub>CCT</sub>, fractal dimension; OSVR<sub>CCT</sub>, object surface-to-volume ratio; MPD<sub>CCT</sub>, mean pore diameter; SMI<sub>CCT</sub>, structure model index; T<sub>CCT</sub>, tortuosity; Class 1<sub>CCT</sub>, TP of pores of 33–300  $\mu\text{m}$ ; Class 2<sub>CCT</sub>, TP of pores of 300–700  $\mu\text{m}$ ; Class 3<sub>CCT</sub>, TP of pores of 700–1003  $\mu\text{m}$ ; Class 4<sub>CCT</sub>, TP of pores of 1003–3000  $\mu\text{m}$ ; Class 5<sub>CCT</sub>, TP of pores >3000  $\mu\text{m}$ ;  $\epsilon_a$ , air-filled porosity;  $k_a$ , air permeability;  $D_p/D_0$ , gas diffusivity;  $\tau$ , tortuosity;  $d$ , equivalent pore diameter;  $X$ ,  $X$ -parameter (refer to text for more information)

	$\epsilon_a$	$D_p/D_0$	$k_a$	$\tau$	$d$	$P$ -parameter	$X$
TP	<b>0.80</b>	<b>0.55</b>	0.27	0.10	0.34	0.28	<b>0.65</b>
TP <sub>CCT</sub>	<b>0.75</b>	<b>0.78</b>	<b>0.58</b>	−0.33	<b>0.63</b>	<b>0.59</b>	0.3
OSVR <sub>CCT</sub>	−0.03	−0.24	<b>−0.41</b>	0.33	<b>−0.56</b>	<b>−0.49</b>	0.23
SMI <sub>CCT</sub>	0.02	<b>0.41</b>	<b>0.55</b>	<b>−0.49</b>	0.34	<b>0.46</b>	<b>−0.39</b>
MPD <sub>CCT</sub>	0.23	<b>0.55</b>	<b>0.70</b>	<b>−0.49</b>	<b>0.74</b>	<b>0.72</b>	−0.23
FD <sub>CCT</sub>	<b>0.73</b>	<b>0.51</b>	0.19	0.00	0.25	0.20	<b>0.55</b>
DA <sub>CCT</sub>	0.27	−0.01	−0.18	0.28	−0.14	−0.16	<b>0.43</b>
CE <sub>CCT</sub>	<b>−0.46</b>	−0.33	−0.06	−0.02	0.03	0.01	<b>−0.35</b>
T <sub>CCT</sub>	<b>−0.57</b>	<b>−0.72</b>	<b>−0.39</b>	<b>0.58</b>	<b>−0.45</b>	<b>−0.37</b>	−0.02
X <sub>CCT</sub>	−0.09	−0.33	−0.1	<b>0.43</b>	0.01	0.03	<b>0.235</b>
Class 1 <sub>CCT</sub>	<b>0.50</b>	<b>0.36</b>	0.04	−0.01	−0.02	−0.01	<b>0.37</b>
Class 2 <sub>CCT</sub>	<b>0.60</b>	<b>0.36</b>	0.04	0.00	0.18	0.11	<b>0.49</b>
Class 3 <sub>CCT</sub>	<b>0.63</b>	<b>0.59</b>	<b>0.40</b>	−0.27	<b>0.59</b>	<b>0.48</b>	0.29
Class 4 <sub>CCT</sub>	<b>0.53</b>	<b>0.77</b>	<b>0.80</b>	<b>−0.48</b>	<b>0.82</b>	<b>0.80</b>	0.00
Class 5 <sub>CCT</sub>	<b>0.47</b>	<b>0.75</b>	<b>0.81</b>	<b>−0.44</b>	<b>0.71</b>	<b>0.75</b>	−0.05

measurements enabled us to relate their results, namely the soil pore architectural parameters derived from the X-ray CT images to the functional soil structural parameters  $D_p/D_0$  and  $k_a$ . We used the CT scan parameters of the connected porosity, which were assumed to be more relevant than those derived from TP<sub>CT</sub>. In addition, we investigated the relationships between soil quality and texture determined at bulk soil samples with  $D_p/D_0$ ,  $k_a$  and the X-ray CT-derived structural parameters.

TP<sub>CCT</sub> and  $\epsilon_a$  were strongly correlated ( $r=0.75$ ) with TP<sub>CCT</sub> ranging between 35 and 99% of  $\epsilon_a$  with an average of 67% (Fig. 6a, Table 5) suggesting the relevance of pores between 20 and 33  $\mu\text{m}$  for  $\epsilon_a$ . Accordingly, regressing  $\epsilon_a$  with TP<sub>CT</sub> had a higher correlation coefficient ( $r=0.83$ ). In our topsoil,  $D_p/D_0$  was mainly dependent on TP<sub>CCT</sub> ( $r=0.78$ ), BD ( $r=-0.79$ ), and tortuosity, T<sub>CCT</sub> ( $r=-0.72$ ). Higher BD reduces  $\epsilon_a$ , leading to a subsequent reduction in  $D_p/D_0$  at the same soil water potential. Other less strong but equally significant correlations were found with the structural parameters MPD<sub>CCT</sub> ( $r=0.55$ ), FD<sub>CCT</sub> ( $r=0.51$ ) and SMI<sub>CCT</sub> ( $r=0.41$ ), highlighting pore shape and structure complexity as pivotal soil properties that affect gas transport parameters. The roughness and complexity of pores reduced gas interchange, whereas the more cylindrical and self-similar ones favoured gas diffusion. Bulk density and soil texture were identified as governing factors for  $D_p/D_0$  (Grable and Siemer 1968), but others have found no influence of these on  $D_p/D_0$  (Eden *et al.* 2011). The  $d$  ranged from 193 to 1076  $\mu\text{m}$  and averaged 425  $\mu\text{m}$ . It was significantly ( $P < 0.0001$ ) and positively ( $r=0.74$ ) correlated with the

mean pore diameter MPD<sub>CCT</sub> determined by X-ray CT, which ranged from 425 to 1481  $\mu\text{m}$  with an average of 841  $\mu\text{m}$  (Fig. 6b). The pore classes enclosing pores from 700 to 3000  $\mu\text{m}$  were equally correlated with  $d$ . It appears that MPD<sub>CCT</sub> derived from CT-images could potentially be used as independently obtained parameter for predicting  $k_a$  in arable soils. Moreover, we found a positive and significant ( $P < 0.001$ ) relationship between the tortuosity derived from the X-ray CT images T<sub>CCT</sub> and the tortuosity calculated using the gas parameters determined at a matric potential of  $-100\text{ cm}$ ,  $D_p/D_0$  and  $\epsilon_a$ , with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.58 (Table 5). The CT-derived tortuosity ranged between 1.81 and 5.77 and was in all cases higher than the  $D_p/D_0$ -based tortuosity, which ranged from 1.62 to 2.58 (Fig. 6c). In contrast, Katuwal *et al.* (2015) found consistently higher  $D_p/D_0$ -based tortuosity than CT-derived tortuosity. In their study, however, the soils were repacked, and with the exception of one soil, had lower clay (157–197  $\text{g kg}^{-1}$ ) and SOC (0.9–2%) contents than the topsoil used in our study. A less well aggregated soil structure thus can be assumed. The  $D_p/D_0$ -based tortuosity-connectivity parameter,  $X$ , ranged between 1.45 and 2.08, which is in the range of values reported by others (e.g. Chamindu Deepagoda *et al.* 2012). The  $X_{\text{CCT}}$  maximum value was 2.34 and the minimum value was 1.69. But although the range was rather similar to  $X$ , the correlation between the two parameters was relatively weak ( $r=0.25$ ) (Table 5; Fig. 6d). The variation of the parameter is small but not negligible as commonly assumed in  $D_p/D_0$  power function models and recently discussed by Katuwal *et al.* (2015).

## Conclusions

In this study we analysed the effect of long-term agricultural intensification defined as irrigation and IT on soil quality and structural parameters. Irrigation had no significant effect on any of the parameters measured. In contrast, IT increased the Dexter index of the topsoil, which resulted in higher BD and lower TP. The Dexter index crossed the previously proposed critical threshold of 10 resulting in a more pipe-like soil structure with an overall more poorly connected pore network under IT compared with DD. This was also reflected by the CT-derived structural parameters MPD<sub>CCT</sub>, CE<sub>CCT</sub> and SMI<sub>CCT</sub> and the functional pore-structural  $P$ -parameter. Differences in pore morphometrical parameters such as  $P$ -parameter, pore size distribution and pore shape were attributed to mechanical disturbance and SOC depletion through IT. Moreover, significant correlations between structural parameters derived with X-ray CT and air permeability and gas diffusivity measurements verified that X-ray CT parameters might be useful proxies for relevant functional parameters including equivalent pore diameter, connectivity and tortuosity required to predict gas diffusivity and air permeability. This is a first step to test this concept on soil collected as intact cores from a site under long-term arable production.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.



## Acknowledgements

This project was funded through the New Zealand Ministry for Business Innovation and Education (Contract 34573) and the European-RISE project 'PROTINUS' (Contract 645717) with counter-funding from the Royal Society of New Zealand. Thanks are due to Paul Mudge and Bryan Stevenson for discussions around the study design and site selection, FAR for granting us access to their property, Andre, Matteo, Kathryn, Stephanie, Frank and Bodil for assistance with laboratory and field work.

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Handling editor: Celine Duwig